Edible Wild Plants
of West Michigan
Volume 1

SPROUT DISTRO

... from the occupied territories currently known as grand rapids, michigan
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Crabapples can be further identified by their leaves before they begin fruiting. The leaves are sharply toothed and oval in shape. Leaves are typically two to three inches long. The underside of the leaves of some species are fuzzy, while others are hairless. Leaves tend to progress from light green in the spring, to darker green in the summer, and finally orange or reddish in the fall.

Crabapple bark is grayish, scaly, non-striped, and cracked with the tree trunk and limbs often appearing "knotty."

Harvesting

Crabapples can be picked (if they can be reached) or shaken off the tree. To check to make sure they are ripe, cut open one of the crabapples and check to see that the seeds are brown. If they are not, the crabapples are not ready.

Crabapples tend to be very tart and are often used in recipes with other ingredients to offset their tartness. Some people use them to make jellies, crabapple butter, sauce, or in baked goods.

Introduction

This a short guide to identifying, foraging, harvesting, and using edible and medicinal wild plants that can be found in the area currently known as West Michigan. All of these plants have been found either within the city limits of Grand Rapids or within a short distance. They're easy for beginners to find and unless noted, there are no (as long as you cross-reference if in doubt) poisonous or toxic look-a-likes .

We decided to put together this zine in order to have an easy-to-reproduce introduction to edible and medicinal wild plants. Sometimes it can be overwhelming to go out into the woods with a field guide and to try to identify everything that you see. Instead, we encourage people to start with a few varieties and familiarize themselves with more over time. While it may take a little bit of practice to learn how to identify wild plants, it's an easy and rewarding process that we strongly encourage people of all ages to undertake.

The indigenous cultures who lived in this area had an intimate knowledge of the land, the plants, and the animals that inhabited it. In contrast, the majority of us living in this current society have a disconnected relationship with the land in which it is something to fear, be skeptical of, and to shape for our own purposes. Clearly, the former is the better approach and one that raises the question of how we might act differently if we had a different orientation towards the land. Would we allow the land we are a part of to be destroyed via fracking, mining, industrial production, etc? Hopefully this zine is one small part in re-thinking our relationship with the land.

A Note on Usage

This obviously isn't a full-fledged field guide, nor are we experts. It is meant to be a brief introduction. To help with identification, we have included line drawings for most plants as well as at least one picture. There are additional pictures (in color) on our website for each plant listed in this guide at:

http://www.sproutdistro.com/category/wild-plant-profiles/

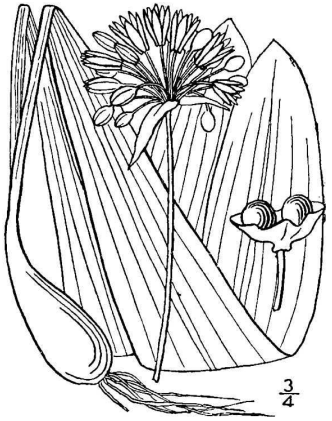
If you would like additional help identifying these and other plants, we suggest you purchase a field guide.

Plants Contained in this Volume

The plants covered in this volume are:

Ramps (Wild Leeks), Wild Garlic, Wild Asparagus, Lamb's Quarters, Juneberry, Wild Bergamot, Black Raspberry, Blackberry, Purslane, Dandelion, Hen-of-the-Woods, Dryad's Saddle, Chicken-of-the-Woods, Blue Violet, and Crabapple.

Ramps



Ramps are a popular wild food that is easy to forage. They are also known as "wild leeks" (allium tricoccum). Ramps are a perennial onion with a garlic-like odor that grow in rich moist soils in deciduous woods throughout most of Michigan and the greater region. Ramps are edible in the spring, summer, and fall season.

Identification

Ramps are found growing in patches in the spring. They have 2 to 3 broad, smooth, light green, onion-scented leaves in the early spring (resembling a "Lily-of-the-valley", which actually is poisonous). The broad, smooth leaves grow off a stem that has a burgundy or reddish-purple tint. As the summer comes, the leaves of ramps begin to whither away as the leaves on nearby trees grow and crowd them out. A six-inch to one-and-a-half foot flower stalk supporting a small cluster of flowers grows on ramps in the summer. Ramps are often found on hillsides near streams.

Harvesting

There are two parts of ramps that are usable: the leaves and the bulbs. In the spring, the leaves can be harvested and used in a variety of different ways (a common example is pesto). The bulbs can also be harvested in the spring or harvested throughout the year. They can be used in place of onions or leeks in soups or in other ways. To harvest ramps, dig them up with a small shovel. Or to use the leaves, simply remove the leaves.

Identification

Blue Violet is easily identifiable by its familiar blue flowers. The flowers—which tend to be about an inch across—are five-petaled. The three lower petals are boldly veined.

The broad leaves are odorless and nearly heart-shaped. The flowers and leaves grow on separate stems.

Harvesting

To harvest Blue Violet, just pull off the individual flowers and collect them. They can be used to make violet syrup (imparting a beautiful blue/purple color), in salads, or even candied. The flowers have a somewhat surprising peppery aftertaste. The greens can also be used to thicken soups or they can be dried and cut for tea. The greens can function as a spinach substitute as well and can be sautéed or steamed.

Crabapple

Crabapples are different from other wild apples in that they are significantly smaller and may appear at first glance to look more like berries than apples. They are bushy, medium-sized trees that grow to a maximum of 15 to 30 feet. There are hundreds of varieties of crabapples, so it is often difficult (and relatively unimportant) to identify the exact variety of the tree.

They are found in fields and thickets across the region. They begin ripening in August and last into the fall. Crabapples are popular as ornamental trees so they are readily found in more domesticated areas as well.

Identification

Crabapple trees are small with significant five-petaled blossoms (often white, but pink to pinkish white is also common). Typically these appear in late April and early May, but some varieties bloom later. These will eventually give way to fruits in the late summer and early fall. When the crabapples appear, it is easiest to identify the trees, but it is also possible to identify crabapples based on their leaves and bark.

The crabapple fruit are about one to two inches in diameter with a sepal on the bottom. The color of crabapples can vary greatly. Some are red while others are orange or yellow. By cutting a fruit open along its "equator," you can verify that they a crabapples by looking for five seeds. The crabapple fruits grow in clusters of fruits and leaves:

Like other polypore mushrooms, the underside of Chicken-of-the-Woods mushrooms are covered in holes (pores). There are no poisonous look-alikes for Chicken-of-the-Woods.

Harvesting

The younger you can find a Chicken-of-the-Woods mushroom, the better it will taste. If a knife can slice through the mushroom with ease, it is worth taking. With a mushroom that is past its prime, you can sometimes cut off the edges and use those while leaving the majority of the mushroom. The mushroom should also be inspected for insect infestation. The mushrooms are great in soups, sautéed in oil, or used in recipes.

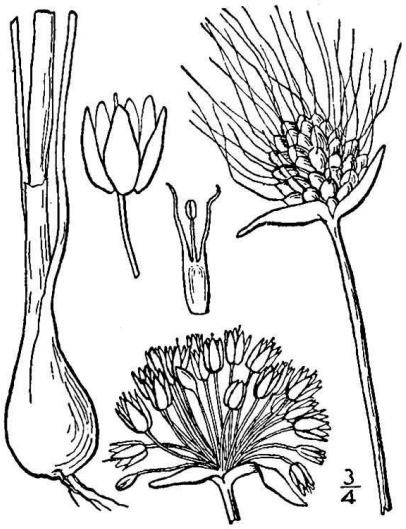
Chicken-of-the-Woods will keep returning each year on the same tree as long as there is enough plant material to provide it with nutrients, so it may be worth remembering the location when you find the mushrooms.

Blue Violet

Blue Violet (Viola papilionacea) is a common early spring and summer flower that can be found throughout the Grand Rapids and greater Michigan areas. The flowers and leaves are edible and can be used in a variety of different ways.

Violets can be found in cultivated areas, lawns, parks, open areas in the woods, and in meadows. The plant is perennial and will keep coming back in the same general area each year.

Wild Garlic



Wild Garlic (allium vineale) is a commonly found plant throughout Michigan. It is commonly found growing in full sun in fields and along roadsides. Wild Garlic is also frequently known as Crow Garlic. It is distinguished by its strong onion/garlic odor and parts of the plant can be used throughout the year.

Identification

Wild Garlic comes up early in the spring when its leaves can be used like chives. Wild Garlic grows to be 12 to 18 inches tall with hollow gray-green leaves (which tend to be tough) emerging from a small bulb.

Wild garlic has a strong smell of garlic and onion that comes from all parts of the plant, but especially the bulb. As wild garlic grows throughout the season, it begins to produce flowers.

Harvesting

All parts of Wild Garlic can be eaten, depending on the season. In the spring, leaves can be used like chives. In the summer, the flowers can be used in salads. To use the leaves and the flowers of Wild Garlic, just cut them off.

To use the bulbs in place of garlic, pull the plant from the ground. When you pull the plant, you will find a bulb that resembles domesticated forms of garlic. There will often be a main bulb surrounded by smaller bulblets. To use the bulbs, peel the papery coating off as you would with other types of garlic. The bulblets can be planted to help keep the plant growing and can be incorporated into a garden.

Asparagus

Wild asparagus (asparagus officinalis) can be found throughout West Michigan along roadsides, in fields, and along fence rows. Wild asparagus tends to have a bit sweeter taste than cultivated asparagus.

Asparagus is best harvested in the spring, but it can be identified for future harvesting throughout the summer season.

Identification

Wild asparagus is a soft, feathery plant that grows about two to six feet tall. It has a fern-like appearance with side branches evenly spaced along a central stalk that tapers as it nears the top.

Each plant grows several stalks that resemble the asparagus that most people are familiar with. As the growing season continues, wild asparagus produces berries that eventually turn red.

Here is a close up of an asparagus shoot:

Harvesting

Wild asparagus is harvested best in the spring in late April through May. Its shoots look similar (albeit generally a bit skinnier) than the asparagus that is grown in gardens or on farms. Break off the shoots when they are four to six inches tall.

In the spring, search for brown, dead foliage of the previous year's growth and look at the base for new shoots.
Asparagus will send up shoots throughout the summer, so one may occasionally

Chicken-of-the-Woods

Chicken-of-the-Woods (Polyporous sulphureus)—also known as “Sulphur Shelf”—is a great mushroom for beginners. It has a great flavor and texture, can be used in a wide range of recipes, and is relatively easy-to-find because of its bold color and large size. It is not uncommon for a single mushroom to way as much as fifty-pounds!

It gets its name because its texture and taste is strongly reminiscent of chicken. Consequently, it can be used in vegan and vegetarian cooking as a substitute in recipes where chicken is needed.

Identification

Chicken-of-the-Woods mushrooms are found on dead or injured deciduous trees. They can be found either on fallen or standing trees. Their bright orange appearance makes them relatively easy to spot. They definitely stand out in the woods.

Chicken-of-the-Woods is distinguished by its large, many leveled brackets or shelves. These are overlapping, flat, and fan-shaped. They typically are 2 to 12 inches across. These are typically found growing up the trunk of a tree or along a fallen log:

resembles a pheasant. It is tan to brown with dark, feathery scales that overlap:

The underside of the mushroom is covered in pores. These are large enough to see without a magnifying glass and the pore surface is off-white to yellowish.

The entire mushroom has a smell slightly reminiscent of watermelons.

The key is finding them when young, you don't want them to be too big or they aren't worth eating. The size of your hand is ideal, but bigger is sometimes okay, just make sure that they are still soft and not tough. If the spore layer is quite thick (larger than 1/16th of an inch), it isn't worth taking.

Harvesting

Harvesting Dryad's Saddle is simple, just cut off the whole mushroom or cut off the outer edges. The key is to get it when it is young. Old mushrooms taste terrible and are largely inedible. If your knife cannot cut through it, it isn't worth taking. Similarly, you should also make sure the mushroom is not infested with insects.

The mushroom is best sautéed in olive oil or margarine. They should be sliced thin and cooked quickly, allowing them to cook too long will make them too hard. An alternative means of preparation is to boil them in broth.

find a shoot or two during the summer season.

It can be eaten raw (it tastes surprisingly good) or can be prepared the same as cultivated asparagus.

Lamb's Quarters

Lamb's Quarters (Chenopodium album) is a common plant across Michigan. It's found almost anywhere from spring to fall on disturbed soil, in fields, along roadsides and trails, in vacant lots, and parks. If you garden, chances are that you know Lamb's Quarters as a prolific weed. However, like many "weeds" it is actually a beneficial plant. It is high in Vitamins A and C, riboflavin, niacin, calcium, manganese, potassium, and iron.

Identification

Lamb's Quarters is an odorless branching plant that eventually grows 3 to 10 feet tall. The leaves are variable, with the upper leaves being narrow and toothless and the lower leaves being roughly diamond -shaped and broadly toothed.

A distinguishing feature of Lamb's Quarters are the underside of its leaves, which are often mealy white (almost lavender like):

As the plant grows, it develops small, greenish ball-shaped flowers that eventually turn reddish in the fall. Once the flowers turn reddish, they develop black seeds.

Harvesting

To harvest Lamb's Quarters, pull off the leaves. The younger leaves are the best.

Lamb's Quarters are excellent steamed for 5 to 10 minutes, as they have a taste that resembles a more nut-like spinach. They can also be sautéed or used in any recipe that calls for spinach. Like all greens, they cook down quite a bit, so you may want to harvest more than you think you need.

In the fall, the seeds can be harvested and used as a grain. Like the leaves, they are highly nutritious.

Juneberries

Juneberries (Amelanchier) are easy-to-find multi-stemmed shrubs and trees that are found widely across Michigan. Also known as Serviceberries, Juneberries are widely planted as ornamental trees but also occur in the wild. They have blueberry-like fruits that can be harvest in June. The berries have a flavor that tastes like a combination of apples and blueberries while the seeds have an almond-like taste.

Identification

Juneberries are small shrubs or trees. They have opposite, stalked, oval, toothed, pointed leaves that grow about two inches long. In the spring, white five-petal flowers appear before the berries.

The berries have a crown on the side of the stalk that makes them easy to distinguish. They are about ¼ to 1/3 inch across resembling blueberries. They start red and later turn a blue/black color as they ripen.

The trees have a tight and smooth gray bark.

Harvesting

To harvest Hen of the Woods you can either cut the whole mushroom or cut off the individual caps. When harvesting, be sure to make sure it is soft (can be squeezed easily between your fingers) and that a knife cuts easily through it. It is also prone to insect infestation, so look closely before taking it.

Hen of the Woods is an excellent mushroom served alone or in a variety of dishes. It goes well with rice, can be used in soups, and in a bunch of other ways. It freezes and dries well, making it easy to preserve.

Dryad's Saddle

Dryad's Saddle (Polyporus squamosus) is a common and easy-to-identify polypore mushroom found throughout Michigan. It is most commonly found in May and June, although they can appear throughout the summer and into the fall. Dryad's Saddle is named because its shape resembles a seat that one could envision the dryad nymphs of Greek mythology sitting on. Others have referred to it as a "dry ass saddle" because overly grown mushrooms have a strong leathery texture that is akin to chewing on a leather saddle.

Identification

Dryad's Saddle is a polypore mushroom that is found on dead and decaying hardwood logs. The caps are 2 to 12 inch broad circular or fan shaped. They are thick and often overlapping with multiple mushrooms appearing on a log or tree. Dryad's saddle is also sometimes called a "pheasant back" because its appearance

Hen of the Woods

Hen of the Woods (Grifola frondosa) is a polypore mushroom found throughout Michigan in the fall. Hen of the Woods is very common, albeit somewhat easy to overlook because of its camouflage colors. It is found near the base of trees, often oaks. It often grows in the same place each year.

Hen of the Woods can be a very large mushroom, easily weighing three pounds per mushroom or even into the double digits. It has an excellent taste and is generally a safe mushroom to identify. It is very nutritious and is sold in health food stores and other high-end stores under its Japanese name, Maitake. It's been studied extensively for its cancer-fighting properties.

Identification

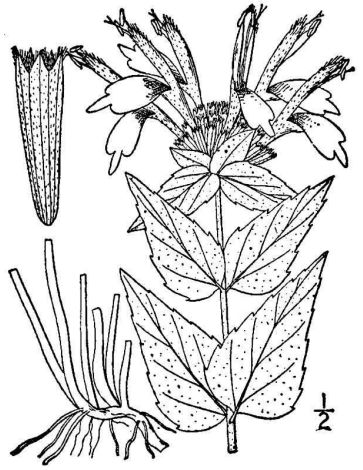
Hen of the Woods is a polypore mushroom that is found growing at the base of deciduous trees. The trees can be either dead or alive. The mushroom is made up of clustered, overlapping grayish-brown (although color can vary widely) spoon or fan -shaped caps that grow ¾ to 2-3/4 inches wide. These grow out of short white stalks that branch out from the base. The caps tend to be spoon or fan-shaped. The color generally gets darer near the outer edges:

Like other polypore mushrooms, the base of Hen of the Woods is covered in pores. The pore surface on the base is white. There are no gills:

Harvesting

To harvest Juneberries, simply pull them off the tree. The darker the berries the better they taste, but once they begin to darken they can be eaten even when they are more red than blue/black. The berries can be eaten raw, used in muffins, made into pies, dried, or in most other ways one would eat berries.

Wild Bergamot



Wild Bergamot (Monarda fistulosa) is a common wildflower found throughout Michigan. It grows on dry edges of forests, thickets, and clearings.

Wild Bergamot is one of many different varieties of what is commonly known as “Bee Balm.” According to many sources, they are largely interchangeable and can all be used for medicinal purposes. Bee Balms are good for cold and flu symptoms, UTIs, yeast infections, digestive woes, wounds, burns, and more.

Identification

Wild Bergamot is a member of the mint family that features highly aromatic flowers on plants that grow 2 to 3 feet tall. The flowers have a lavender color with one growing on each plant. Flowers have narrow, lipped tubes in crowded heads.

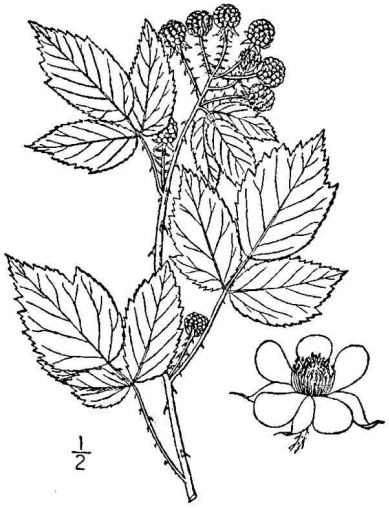
The flowers grow on square stems that are slightly reddish in color. Leaves grow oppositely up Wild Bergamot's stem and smell minty when crushed. The leaves are triangular to oval or lance shaped.

Harvesting

To harvest Wild Bergamot, cut off the plants near the ground. You want both the leaves and the flowers, as both can be used.

Wild Bergamot can be dried (hang it for a couple of weeks, with flowers and leaves) or made into a tincture. Wild Bergamot tea is generally used for a nerve or stomach tonic. For additional medical uses, consult an herbal medicine book.

Black Raspberry



Black Raspberry (Rubus occidentalis) is a bramble that grows across Michigan. It is a sprawling vine-like shrub that forms into a thicket. The berries are easy to use and harvest with no toxic lookalikes when ripe.

Black Raspberries are frequently found in disturbed areas (for example those that have been logged or cut), but also appear in meadows, along streams and lakes, along trails and roads, and in open woods. They will grow in shady and sunny areas, but produce the most berries if they receive some sun.

Black Raspberries are the first brambles to appear in the early summer, before Red Raspberries and Blackberries.

Identification

Black Raspberries grow on canes that are generally arched. They get to be around 6 feet in length, but can be smaller. The canes have sharp, curved thorns.

Dandelion

Dandelion (Taraxacum officinale)—while perhaps most well-known as a weed—is also a very nutritious wild plant that is found across Michigan. Most parts of the plant can be eaten. Moreover, the plant is highly nutritious. Dandelion greens contain calcium, iron, fiber, Vitamins A, E, and K. Because of their nutritional value, dandelion greens have started to make an appearance in some grocery stores and farmers markets, but there is no need to buy them when they are readily available.

Identification

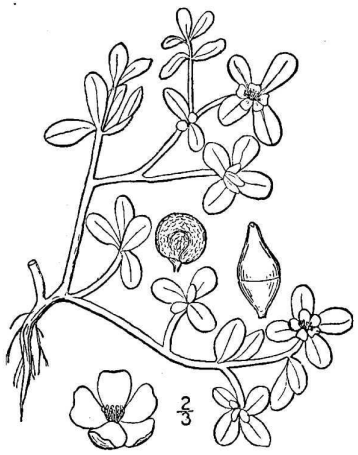
Dandelions are most easily identified by their characteristic flowers, which also happen to be edible. The solitary flowers are found on stems that are milky and hollow when opened.

Dandelion leaves have sharp, irregular lobes. They form a rosette above the central taproot. If you dig below the leaves, you can also find the often large taproots.

Harvesting

The leaves are best harvested when they are young either before the plant blooms in early spring or when new growth forms in the fall. The roots can also be dug up and ground into a coffee-like substitute throughout the season. The flowers can also be eaten if the green sepals are removed and are most often found in the early summer. Many people find the taste of dandelion to be somewhat bitter. However, when mixed with other greens and used in recipes, they become significantly more palatable.

Purslane



Purslane (Portulaca oleracea) is a plant that many gardeners know as a "weed" (it is also known as "Pigweed"). It seeds prolifically and can be found in almost any garden. Less known however is that it has good amounts of beta carotene (more than spinach), iron, vitamins A and C, calcium, and potassium.

Purslane is found throughout the Michigan area in gardens, waste areas, and just about any open area. In recent years it has shown up at farmer's markets in Grand Rapids, but there is really no reason to purchase it when it grows so abundantly.

Identification

Purslane grows along he ground with light green leaves and reddish stems: The plant produces thick stems with reddish stems that grown between 4 to 10 inches long. The leaves are opposite or alternate, ranging from ½ inch to 2 inches long. The leaves are "fleshy" and paddle-shaped with a small, stalk-less, 5-pettled flower that opens on sunny mornings.

Harvesting

To harvest purslane, pull it out of the ground and wash it thoroughly. Some recipes call for eating just the green leaves, but the stems are also edible. They can be added fresh to salads or boiled in just enough water to cover for ten minutes. Purslane can also be used in stir-frys and on sandwiches. For the ambitious, the stems can be pickled and the seeds can even be ground into flour.

Black Raspberry leaves are compound, doubly toothed leaves with sharply pointed tips. They grow alternately along the canes, usually having 3 leaflets but sometimes 5. Black Raspberry leaves grow up to 3 inches long.

Black Raspberries start out green and hard early in the season before progressing through a series of color changes: yellowish, salmon-colored, bright red, purplish-red, and purplish-black when ready.

Harvesting

Black Raspberries are relatively easy to pick. The darkest berries (black) are what you want (growing up to ½ inch across), leave the unripe ones for a later time. They will pull easily off of the receptacle (core) when they are ready. The fruits will be hollow when harvested. Because of the thorns, long sleeves and pants are often helpful. Black Raspberries can be used as you would any other berry. They are great raw or used in baked goods.

Blackberry

Blackberry (Rubus allegheniensis) is a well-known edible berry found across Michigan. They mature in the late summer and are a very tasty berry that can be eaten raw or cooked.

Blackberry is common in Grand Rapids and thickets of blackberry brambles can be found throughout the city. They are found on waste ground, pastures, sun-drappled woods, forest clearing, thickets, and along roads and paths.

Identification

Blackberries grow on brambles, which are sprawling vine-like shrubs. The canes (stems) grow to about a maximum of 8 feet in height, often arching and varying in size. The canes are smooth with numerous sharp thorns. Young canes are greenish or reddish in color, while older canes are brown.

The Blackberry fruit itself matures to a dark, glossy black in late summer when it is ready to eat. The fruits are about a ½ inch across. They change from red to black as they are ready. Another key aspect of identifying a Blackberry is that the core of the Blackberry remains inside the berry when it is picked. This is different from Black Raspberries, which are distinguished by their hollow center.

Blackberry leaves are compound, doubly toothy, and coarsely textured with sharply pointed tips. Leaves alternate on prickly petioles (stemlets). Leaves of fruiting canes have 3 leaflets, while non-fruiting canes have 5. The leaves are up to 5 inches long,

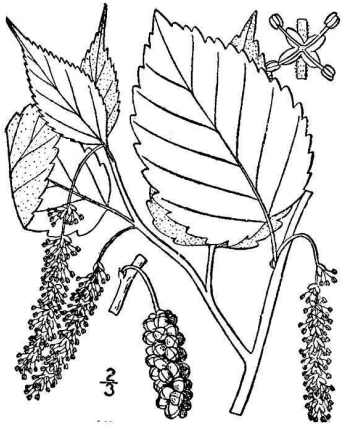
with the terminal leaflet being larger than the side leaves.

Harvesting

Blackberries can be harvested in the late summer, well after both Red and Black Raspberries. Because Blackberry brambles are covered in thorns, long-sleeve shirts and pants are recommended.

They can be eaten raw or used in pies, muffins, or to make jam. The leaves can also be dried to make tea and the young shoots can be harvested and eaten in the spring.

Red Mulberry



Red Mulberry (Morus rubra) is a medium to large tree, growing up to 75 feet. Red Mulberry is found in woodlands, fields, urban areas, along fence lines, and on roadsides. The trees prefer some shade.

Mulberries are found across Michigan and the ease of finding Mulberry trees makes them one of the easiest wild berries for beginners. Mulberry trees can be found throughout urban areas in Grand Rapids, both in yards and in wooded areas. They also are easy to use and are delicious raw or baked.

Identification

Mulberry trees are easy to identify in the summer by the fruits, leaves, and bark. The fruits are about 1 inch long and appear in drupes originating from a cluster of flowers.

Mulberry leaves vary to some degree. They are generally 3-6 inches long with fine teeth. They can be oval shaped or have 2-3 lobes. Red Mulberry leaves tend to be shiny on the tops of the leaves and rough undersides.

Mulberry bark is reddish-brown in color. It is covered in smooth ridges. The diameter of a Mulberry tree generally does not exceed 3 feet.

Harvesting

Mulberries are easy to pick. Harvest the berries when they are dark purple to almost black in color. Under ripe mulberries are mildly toxic, so be sure to wait until they are dark and leave the lighter color ones for another day.

You can either pick each Mulberry off the tree individually or put a drop cloth underneath the tree and shake the branches. The drop cloth method greatly speeds up the process.

They are great raw, in pie, in muffins, etc. They can also be dehydrated/dried and/or frozen.